The Heart's Final Beat

An ADVENTURE'S GUILD adventure
set in the RAVENLOFT campaign world
for four to six heroes of 6th to 8th level

by John W. Mangrum

"The Heart's Final Beat" is a RAVENLOFT adventure set in Necropolis, although it can be adapted for use in almost any domain in the Demiplane of Dread. For the sake of the story, one or more characters should either be members of the Order of the Guardians or have close ties to that brotherhood. Though all the information needed to play this adventure is included here, Dungeon Masters may find *Domains of Dread* (TSR #2174) and *Van Richten's Guide to Fiends* (TSR #9477) useful sources of further information. This adventure highlights *Champions of the Mists* (TSR #9559), using kits and secret societies from that book.

Before beginning the adventure, give the heroes the following information:

> The Order of the Guardians is an extremely secretive society of men and women dedicated to protecting the Land of the Mists from the insidious threat of powerful artifacts created to serve wicked ends. Those accursed tools of evil which the Guardians cannot destroy they seal away, hiding them from the world that might abuse their powers.
>
> Although the order is divided into numerous isolated factions, most sects do keep records of the accursed artifacts held by the other groups. A certain Sister Eleyna of the Guardians in Mordent was studying the historical records of the malignant artifact known as "the Key to the Abyss" when, in a moment of inspiration, she conceived of a way to destroy the supposedly indestructible item! The Key is held by an order calling itself the Watchers at the Gate, so with all due haste Sister Eleyna sent off a fellow monk to the Watchers' stronghold in Necropolis. This Guardian, Brother Greggory by name, bore a sealed letter detailing the means of the Key's destruction.
>
> When the messenger's return was a week overdue, Sister Eleyna grew concerned. The letter contained important information which could prove disastrous to the Order if it fell into the wrong hands. Thus, Sister Eleyna has decided to send another Guardian [one of the PCs] to follow Greggory's trail to the Watchers' stronghold, learn his fate, and recover the letter. Since the messenger would almost certainly be facing unknown dangers, the Guardians have arranged for him [or her] to be joined by several of their allies.

Beginning the Adventure

> After a week's travel to Necropolis, and a hard day's trek into the Mountains of Misery, your hastily assembled group of heroes now stands before the Watchers' stronghold. Located on an ancient and abandoned trade route, their home is quite literally a fortress—a blocky structure of massive, weathered stones jutting from the foot of a cliff. Doubtless this ancient fortification extends deep into the mountain's heart.
>
> Disturbingly, as you near the stronghold, the air grows clammy and humid, despite the rising elevation. No birds fly overhead, and no mountain breezes ease your crawling skin.

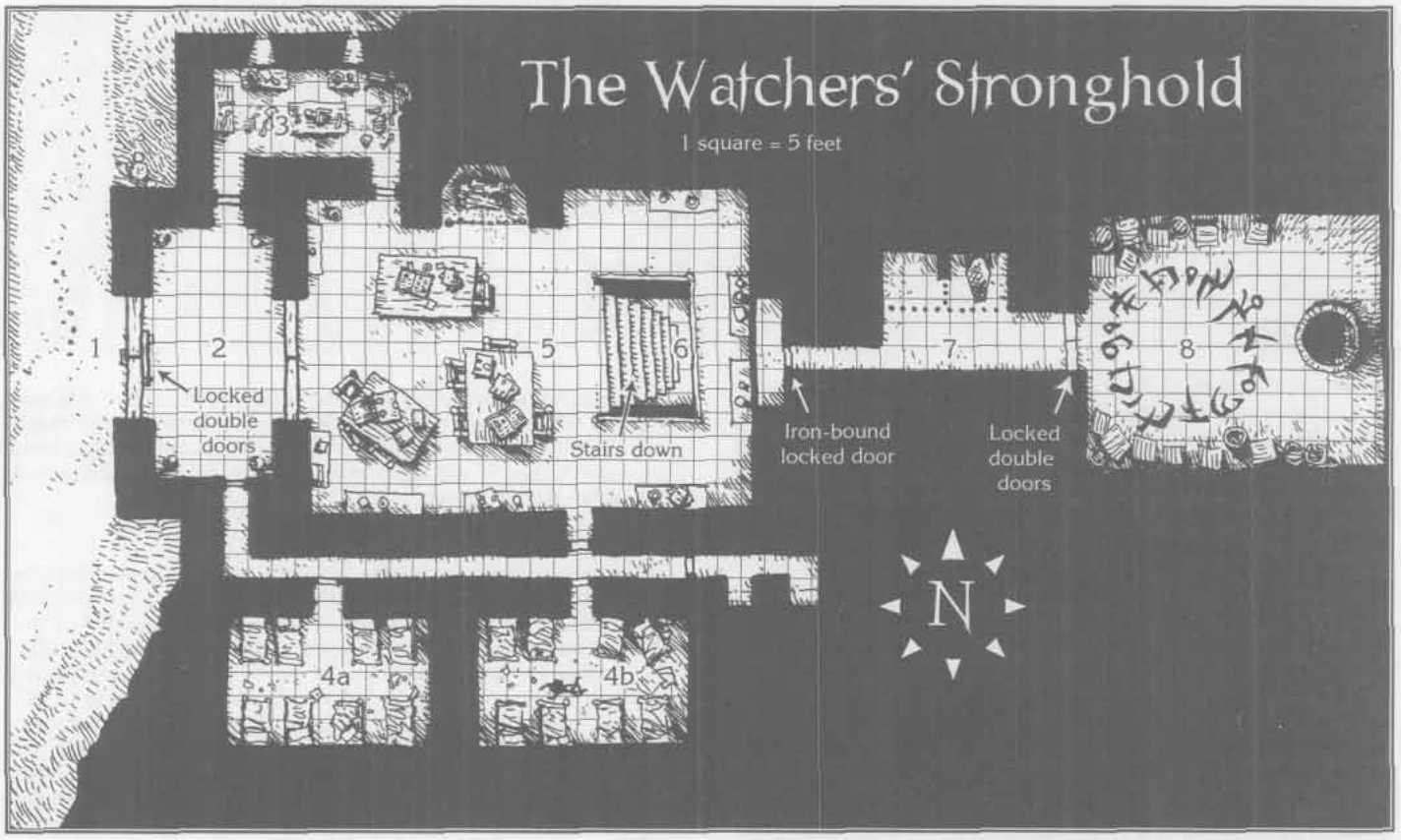
This scenario assumes that most of the heroes are strangers to each other, united only by their alliance to the Guardians. If they try to share information, they quickly learn (to their regret) that most of them know nothing about the Watchers other than that they are another branch of the same organization as the Guardians. The PC who is a member of the Guardians knows that the Watchers guard some object known as the Key to the Abyss; it is up to the player whether or not the character shares this information with his or her fellow heroes.

The Fortress

If the heroes search around the fortress, they discover that the massive double doors at the front of the building seem the only way in; what few windows they can find are tiny and protected by thick iron bars. Despite the walls' crumbling appearance, they are quite solid.

Anyone who examines the walls closely finds a line of fist-sized runes carved into the massive stones at roughly chest height, extending around the entire exposed structure. These runes are magical, and a successful Priestcraft proficiency check reveals their purpose: together, they act as a ward against teleportation. Nothing can teleport into or out of this barrier. The Watchers also maintained many other magical protections on their fortress, but most of these protections have since been shattered by the intruders.

The oppressive humidity the heroes sense is just a hint of the Abyssal energies already seeping through the weakening Key. In addition to the obvious effects, the entire area around the fortress acts as a sinkhole of evil (imposing a –1 penalty on all turning



attempts). When a character attempts to turn one of the undead within this area, his or her holy symbol glows slightly. Any Psychic among the PCs can vaguely sense this spiritual malaise hanging over the fort.

When the heroes decide to enter the fortress, go to encounter 1.

1. Entering the Fortress

The massive double doors facing the road are the only entrance into the Watchers' stronghold, and they are not easily breached. Constructed of thick, iron-clad oak timbers, they resist any attempts to simply bash through. The doors are also barred from the inside, making lockpicks essentially useless. The aforementioned runes prevent magical entry. The heroes thus have the choice of battering their way through the doors or simply pulling the bell chain. Either way, the heroes alert the current inhabitants of their presence. When the heroes ring the bell or otherwise announce their arrival, read or paraphrase the following:

> After a few moments, you finally hear the grinding sound of a heavy bar slowly sliding away from the massive portals. A moment later, one of the doors shudders into motion, swinging open a few feet so that a single figure can slip outside. The woman is dressed in a simple gray robe, identical to that worn by the Guardians. Her hands are completely hidden by the voluminous folds, and she keeps her face in the shadows of her cowl, shielded from the afternoon sun.
>
> The doorkeeper stops just outside the door and takes a moment to silently peer at you, then offers a curt greeting. "What do you want?" she asks in a dry voice.

This "Watcher" is actually a juju zombie, sent to get rid of the heroes as quickly as possible. It answers all of the heroes' questions in the same concise, no-nonsense manner, hoping to quickly satisfy these visitors and send them on their way. Its answers are a mixture of half-truths, bluffs, and outright lies. Yes, the messenger from Mordent arrived without complaint (True). Yes, the letter was delivered safely (In fact, the zombie did not know of the letter until this very instant). Yes, the messenger left the stronghold quite some time ago. If he ran into trouble, it was after he left (False; in fact, the messenger is still being tormented within the stronghold). The undead impostor entertains the heroes' questions only as long as absolutely necessary. As soon as it realizes the heroes are looking for the missing messenger, it dismisses the matter as "none of my concern" and insists that they take their search elsewhere.

If this lack of interest is not enough to convince the heroes that all is not right with this Watcher, two further clues may give the ruse away. If a Ghostwatcher is present, he or she sees a desperate apparition appear behind the evasive Watcher. After the monk has replied to a few of the heroes' questions, give that character's player **Handout #1**. Similarly, the undead doorwarden could inadvertently give itself away to a Psychic; give **Handout #2** to any player of a Psychic character. Note that the vision this describes is certainly worthy of a horror check. All of these undead were Kargat in life, killed by the terrible wave of negative energy which destroyed Il Aluk; thus the psychic will see similar deaths for any of the other supposed "Watchers" he or she touches as well.

If a Ghostwatcher or Psychic give any obvious sign that he or she knows something is horribly wrong here, the doorwarden notices their alarm and decides to stop playing games:

> Noticing your distress, the doorwarden shakes her robed head sadly and says, "It appears the charade is up." Suddenly, she rips back her hood to reveal a hideous face of dried, leathery flesh, and eyes which glow like dying embers. The undead creature hisses at you, immediately turning on its heel to bolt for the open door!

The juju zombie wants nothing more than to run inside, seal the doors, and warn its comrades that the visitors have seen through the ruse. If the heroes block its path inside, it will make a desperate grab for the bell chain to raise the alarm, then attempt to fight the heroes alone. The heroes should have no trouble dispatching this single creature. However, during the melee the ghostly monk described in **Handout #1** will slip back inside the fortress (assuming it was seen at all). Once the undead monk has been defeated, the heroes have an easy, if obvious, means of entrance into the fortress.

Should the heroes examine the doorwarden's corpse, they find two items of interest. First, the woman carries a holy symbol, caked in blood and thoroughly defiled (a small kite shield pierced by a slender sword; any hero with Priestcraft can identify it as a holy symbol of Ezra). Second, she bears an hourglass tattoo over her heart. Characters who make successful Intelligence checks with a –6 penalty know that these signify the creature's membership in the Unholy Order of the Grave, a society of undead who serve Death (the ruler of Il Aluk). Any hero with ties to the Necropolis should attempt another Intelligence check, with success reminding him or her of rumors about the life-draining abilities of Death and his agents.

Most of the undead currently in the Fortress are members of that society and thus have been granted the ability to drain levels from their foes (or have that ability augmented if they already possessed it). Oddly, most choose not to use this ability here or use it only as a last resort. The Abyssal energies seeping through the Key have corrupted this region, tainting the life force of every living thing within it to the extent that even these foul undead find them distasteful.

Juju Zombie: AC 6; MV 9; HD 3+12; hp 30; THAC0 15; #AT 1; Dmg 3d4+energy drain (fist); SA successful attack drains one level (Unholy Order of the Grave augmentation, no save); SD immune to nonmagical weapon and to illusions, psionics, electricity, *magic missile*, and mind-affecting spells, half-damage from fire and from blunt or piercing weapons; SW may be turned (as spectre), holy water (2d4 points of damage per vial); SZ M (5'6"); ML fearless (20); Int very (12); AL NE; XP 1,400.

If the heroes think to investigate the stronghold rather than simply storm in, any Cold One among them would, dressed in the monk's robe, make an appropriate spy. Other undead inside the fortress do not react to his or her presence so long as the character keeps face and hands covered and keeps to himself or herself. Such a spy can wander freely throughout the stronghold's upper level as he or she sees fit. If he or she enters the library (area 5), one of the undead present will simply ask (in a notably bored tone) if the "interlopers have been sent packing." So long as he or she grunts out some satisfying answer, they do not bother the disguised hero. However, should he or she attempt to go downstairs, one of them barks out a angry warning:

"Where are you going? Master Bralkain does not want to be disturbed!" The creature then turns to its neighbor and adds a sneering comment: "—whatever it is he's doing down there."

2. Foyer

Just as the mountain pass is drenched in sunlight, the foyer is drenched in shadow. If the undead creature which answered the door had any need of light, this chamber does not show it. The square room is constructed of the same massive stones used for the outside walls; all in all, it seems more befitting a tomb than a foyer. Heavy candelabras stand in each corner, but the candles have all melted down to shapeless lumps and winding tendrils of cold wax.

Before you, a second set of double doors, closed but not nearly as sturdy-looking as the doors leading outside, lead deeper into the fortress. To either side, a single door offers entrance into unknown chambers beyond. Although no light can be seen seeping under the cracks of any of these closed doors, the stronghold is not abandoned; through the door to your left you can hear muffled voices. Though you can't make out their words, you can detect a certain . . . amusement to their banter.

If a Ghostwatcher PC is present, the spectral monk reappears to him or her. Give the player **Handout #3**. In addition to this disturbing visitation, the heroes will start to detect a strange, coppery taste in their mouths. This is yet another manifestation of the

Abyssal energies trickling through the Key to the Abyss. On top of any other effects, the entire upper level of the stronghold acts as a –2 sinkhole of evil (imposing a –2 penalty on all turning attempts). If a character attempts to turn one of the undead within this area, his or her holy symbol grows warm and glows brightly.

3. Kitchen

The left-hand door in the foyer leads into a mid-sized kitchen. Should the heroes investigate this room, drawn by the muffled voices, read or paraphrase the following:

As you cautiously push the door open a crack, the two voices you heard before become much clearer.

". . . I don't know, what bit do you think looks tastiest?" says the first voice.

"Slab of ribs?" replies the second.

"Hmm—flank steak?" counters the first.

"Nah—sweetmeats?" queries the second.

As the hissing, leering voices call each apparent delicacy in turn, you hear a dull thud and a weak, agonizing cry!

As soon as the heroes enter the room, they can see the cruel deeds that accompany this light banter:

In the darkness, your eyes make out three figures in gray robes. One seems to be a badly beaten man, dangling limply by his wrists from chains that hang from the ceiling. Circling him like a pair of cackling vultures are two figures carrying crude metal pokers, apparently taken from the nearby hearth. Although the two tormentors wear the same robes as the man they torment, their faces betray them as unnatural creatures. Long, bloated tongues play over their cracked fangs and drooling lips as they savor their prisoner's terror.

"No," one of the two creatures gleefully howls to its companion, "I know what I want! I'll take the brisket!" It accentuates this choice by slapping the bruised prisoner's chest with the

poker, raising another weak cry from the victim. The dozens of scattered, bloody bones on the floor make it clear that this poor monk will not be the first butchered in this kitchen.

At this point, the ghouls will prepare to carve the prisoner into pieces. If the heroes do not interfere, the monk will be killed horribly in a few torturous rounds. So long as the heroes' battle against the ghouls lasts only a few rounds, the undead in the nearby library do not bother to investigate. They are quite used to sounds of struggle and cries of pain coming from this room and grow curious only if the sounds of combat last too long for their liking.

Ghouls (2): AC 6; MV 9; HD 2; hp 13, 15; THAC0 19; #AT 3; Dmg 1d3/1d3/1d6 (claw/claw/bite); SA successful attack causes paralysis (1d6+2 rounds, save vs. paralyzation to resist); SD immune to *sleep* and *charm* spells; SW may be turned, kept at bay by *protection from evil* (unless attacked); SZ M (5'10", 5'9"); ML steady (12); Int average (9, 8); AL CE; XP 175 each.

If the heroes defeat the ghouls, they can free the monk from his bindings (on a successful Pick Locks roll with a +25% bonus or by prying open the shackles using a poker with a successful Strength check). This monk is in fact Brother Greggory, the Guardian's original messenger, so the Guardian PC should recognize him despite his rather battered condition. The ghouls' torture has left him badly shaken and wounded, but if the heroes take a few minutes to calm the poor man, he tries to explain what has occurred here:

In a quavering voice, Greggory describes his experiences. "I arrived here late in the day . . . and they attacked that very night! Curse my soul, those monsters must have followed me! I must have led them right to the Watchers' doorstep! I'm not sure why they attacked, but it has something to do with the Key. I'd swear upon it!"

If Greggory is asked about the fate of the Watchers, he shudders at the memory, then tells what little he knows:

"Most were slain right away. The few survivors were thrown into the prison downstairs—but not left to rot! No, they kept us for food—blood for the master and . . ." Greggory pauses to take a long look at the gnawed bones scattered around the room and shudders ". . . and meat for his servants!"

If the heroes ask about the letter, Greggory simply tells them that he handed it to Brother Ruden, head of the Watchers. He does not know what Ruden did with the letter, but he assumes the undead invaders now possess it. Like the heroes, Greggory knows next to nothing about the Key itself.

In his current state, Greggory is too weak and dizzy (from the life-draining effects of the attackers, lack of water, and the wounds he took) to accompany the heroes. If magically healed for at least 7 hit points, he can draw them a crude map showing the basic layout of the upper level. However, his nerve has broken from the horrors he has witnessed and he dare not accompany them deeper into the fortress (if forced to do so, he automatically fails all fear and horror checks).

The kitchen's hearth holds a number of crudely-made metal tools used to stoke the fire (the ghouls were using two of these pokers). These tools date back to the stronghold's ancient days as a border fortress and are actually made of cold iron—which may make them useful weapons. Due to their inferior craftsmanship, these cold iron pokers act as crude clubs in combat (damage 1d6–1). Any Monster Hunter PC who knows about the Key to the Abyss at this point should quickly realize that these tools could come in handy if they actually encounter a fiend.

4. Barracks

The side door on the right side of the foyer leads down a hallway to two barracks filled with bunks. Numerous lanterns hang on the walls of the barracks and hall, but the undead do not bother to keep them lit (prudent heroes may wish to take a few lanterns to light their way in the lower level).

The barracks have obviously been looted. In addition to the numerous signs of violence, the heroes find the corpse of a true Watcher, decapitated by overzealous undead during the raid. Master Bralkain found the corpse useless in this ruined state either as a source of blood and as zombie material, so the body was left alone. If the heroes examine the corpse, they find the woman's arms are covered in healed scars, the legacy of a lifetime spent voluntarily offering blood to the insatiable Key.

5. Library

When the fortress was first built, this large chamber served as the stronghold's great hall, used for dining and entertainment. When the Watchers moved in, they converted this room to a library, which they filled with their modest accumulation of Guardian lore. Although the collection is not extremely large, in the wrong hands it could be devastating. Were a darklord to acquire these tomes, he or she would learn the locations of half a dozen Guardian monasteries throughout the Core as well as the secrets of the evil artifacts they guard (it's best not to think about what he or she would then do with that knowledge).

When the heroes first enter this chamber, they find the bulk of the undead intruders passing the time here until their master finally allows them to leave.

As you peer into the vast hall, the faint illumination from a small, barred skylight overhead offers no more than ghostly hints of the room's details. Dusty bookcases stand against the walls here and there, and books lie scattered on several tables about the room. Although the hall's huge hearth has been allowed to grow cold, the room is oppressively hot; just standing in the doorway causes beads of sweat to wind their way down your face. Toward the rear of the room, a wide staircase leads down into utter darkness.

Of more immediate interest, you see six—no, eight—robed figures engaged in various activities about the room. Three of the decayed creatures sit at tables, silently reading, while the other five pull tomes from the bookshelves and toss them in large burlap sacks, going about their work in a decidedly lackluster manner.

The oppressive heat is another sign of the ever-strengthening Abyssal energies leaking through the Key.

Death gave this group a simple command: seek out sources of magical power and bring them back to Il Aluk. All fine and good as far as these undead were concerned, but their leader, Master Bralkain, has been ignoring Death's commands. Instead of gathering up the Watchers' magical lore and returning to their lord immediately, Bralkain has left his underlings loitering here for well over a week. Bralkain is up to something these undead have not figured out, and they do not like it one bit. Some of the more suspicious undead have decided to learn just what Bralkain does during all those hours he spends locked in the stronghold's well room, but they quickly put their research aside when faced with intruders!

In the original tournament upon which this adventure is based, one of the heroes was a Redeemed former agent of Azalin's Kargat. Should any player character share a similar history, a particularly gruesome shock awaits him or her; read or paraphrase the following when the heroes enter the room. If no such character accompanies the party, simply assume that the wight mistakes one of the heroes for a look-alike with a more sinister past.

As you enter the room, the undead scramble from their chores to deal with you. However, one of the undead creatures suddenly stops short. For a moment, its moldering lips curl in confusion, finally splitting into a wide grin. The creature's eyes burn with recognition.

"You!" it hisses. "How wonderful to see you! We all missed you in Il Aluk."

The other undead also now pause to stare at you, and they

too betray a sudden recognition.

Their leader squints and continues, "Azalin ordered us all to the Requiem, and we obeyed. But look at us now. Rotting shells! And look at you—you defied his order! You abandoned us! And look at the reward for your treachery! Why should your heart still beat while ours rot? Why were you spared?" A well of hatred boils up with the creature's words, growing more intense with each question. "It's time you rejoined the fold!"

With that, the undead fling themselves at the heroes. Just as many of the undead recognized their old comrade, the Redeemed character may recognize them too, once he or she looks past the decay. Seeing this unliving example of the fate he or she narrowly avoided is certainly worth a horror check. A character who simply resembles their former comrade will not suffer this shock, of course, but he or she is left with the knowledge that someone who strongly resembles the hero was doing unsavory things in Darkon in the not-too-distant past.

Having been created in the Requiem, these undead are more intelligent than most of their unnatural kind, and if the battle turns against them, the last undead left standing may offer a deal, bargaining for its existence. If the heroes will allow it to leave the stronghold with just one sack of the Watchers' books, it will happily tell the heroes all it knows: that they were sent to find magic, that they learned about the existence of the Watchers and followed the messenger to the Watchers' stronghold, and that Master Bralkain is defying their lord's commands, obsessed with some strange artifact he calls the Key to the Abyss.

If turned, these undead flee to the barracks, not down the stairs.

Wight: AC 5; MV 12; HD 4+3; hp 27; THAC0 15; #AT 1; Dmg 1d4+level drain (touch); SA touch drains two levels (Unholy Order of the Grave augmentation, no save); SD immune to nonmagical weapons, immune to poison, paralyzation, sleep, charm, hold, and cold-based spells; SW silver weapons do full damage, holy water (2d4 points of damage per vial), may be turned, instantly slain by *raise dead*; SZ M (5'5"); ML champion (16); Int high (13); AL LE; XP 2,000.

Ghouls (5): AC 6; MV 9; HD 2; hp 13, 15, 12, 16, 14; THAC0 19; #AT 3; Dmg 1d3/1d3/1d6 (claw/claw/bite); SA successful attack causes paralysis (1d6+2 rounds, save vs. paralyzation to resist); SD immune to *sleep* and *charm* spells; SW may be turned, kept at bay by *protection from evil* (unless attacked); SZ M (average 6'); ML elite (14); Int average (8–10); AL CE; XP 175 each.

Juju Zombies (2): AC 6; MV 9; HD 3+12; hp 35, 24; THAC0 15; #AT 1; Dmg 3d4+energy drain (fist); SA successful attack drains one level (Unholy Order of the Grave augmentation, no save); SD immune to nonmagical weapon and to illusions, psionics, electricity, *magic missile*, and mind-affecting spells, half-damage from fire and from blunt or piercing weapons; SW may be turned (as spectre), holy water (2d4 points of damage per vial); SZ M (6', 6'2"); ML fearless (20); Int very (12); AL NE; XP 1,400 each.

However the heroes handle the undead, once the creatures have all been dealt with, the heroes can look through the three books the undead were reading (still lying open on the tables). Any Psychic PC can detect an increasing spiritual malaise as he or she nears the stairs, sensing the growing evil streaming through the Key.

Book 1: Historical Records
This text (shown in **Handout #4**) is a compilation of historical records surrounding the destruction of the village of Creeana by an infernal creature which came to be known as "the Whistling Fiend." As well as the personal accounts of those who survived the creature's senseless rampage (excerpts of which appear in *Van Richten's Guide to Fiends*), the text contains the recently underlined transcript of an unsubstantiated rumor, recorded years after the fact, detailing the origins of the creature.

Book 2: *The Key to the Abyss*
This tome was written soon after the Watchers first claimed the Key and hid it in their stronghold. The two excerpts shown in **Handout #5** are of particular interest.

Book 3: Personal Journal of Brother Jarvik
Brother Jarvik was a prominent Watcher around the turn of the century. The undead had been reading an intriguing section detailing the results of Jarvik's divinations **(Handout #6)**.

6. Lower Hall

The wide staircase leads down from the library deep into the darkness. At its base a short, wide hallway leads forward to yet another closed, iron-bound door. Although several lanterns hang in this hall, none are currently lit.

The Abyssal energies permeate this level; the entire lower level reeks of sulfur (character must make Constitution checks to avoid nausea; failure imposes a –2 penalty to all rolls and checks for as long as that character stays on this level). To make matters worse, the lower hall and the prison (area 7) act as a –3 sinkhole of evil (imposing a –3 penalty on all turning attempts). When a hero attempts to turn one of the undead within this area, his or her holy symbol grows extremely hot and glows brightly.

7. Prison
If the heroes open the iron-bound door, they see only a narrow hall leading into the shadows. However, from those shadows the heroes hear something speak:

"Is he dead?" asks a gurgling voice, suspicion apparent in its tone. "He smells dead to me." In reply, you hear only a brief, faint murmur.

If the heroes investigate, they quickly find a small prison consisting of two cells. The gurgling voice belongs to the lone wight that acting as jailer for two monks slumped in one of the cells. The low murmur must have come from one of the monks, but from the heroes' vantage point either or both of the Watchers could be the corpse the wight was asking about.

The heroes may be able to take the wight by surprise and in any case should be able to defeat it quickly. Once the creature has been eliminated, the heroes can take its key ring, allowing them to unlock both cells.

The Jailer (wight): AC 5; MV 12; HD 4+3; hp 30; THAC0 15; #AT 1; Dmg 1d4+level drain (touch); SA touch drains two levels (Unholy Order of the Grave augmentation, no save); SD immune to nonmagical weapons, immune to poison, paralyzation, *sleep, charm, hold,* and cold-based spells; SW silver weapons do full damage, holy water (2d4 points of damage per vial), may be turned, instantly slain by *raise dead*; SZ M (6'); ML champion (16); Int very (12); AL LE; XP 2,000.

Only one of the two remaining Watchers in the cell is still alive, and he is near death (having been used repeatedly to slake Master Bralkain's thirst for blood). This Watcher, Brother Pelov by name, is so physically and spiritually exhausted it takes him several minutes to realize that he has been rescued. Until that time, he believes the heroes to be new prisoners and begs them not to let the jailer know that his companion has died. If they find out, the ghouls will cart the dead monk off to the kitchen, or their hideous master will animate him as a mindless slave.

Brother Pelov can offer the heroes the same basic information about the attack as Brother Greggory (see area 3). In addition, he can offer complete details of the stronghold's layout (including what little the heroes will not have explored by now). On top of this, Pelov can tell the heroes that the invader's leader, Master Bralkain, is a vampire (in fact, Bralkain keeps his coffin in the vacant cell).

Brother Pelov expresses his worry over the untended Key before he passes out, muttering that several days have passed since the

Key last received any blood, and by now it is surely draining away the very last drops of its supply. Pelov also comments on the unnatural taint spreading throughout the stronghold. The stench, the heat, the humidity, the strange coppery taste—these are all signs that the Key is dangerously weak. The Abyss is already starting to slip through the portal! All of these fragmentary remarks are likely to alarm heroes who have not yet learned the nature of the Key.

In life, the second monk was Brother Ruden, head of the Watchers of the Gate. Sadly, he has been dead for over a day, having finally succumbed to the wounds he suffered during the initial attack. If a Ghostwatcher PC looks at this Watcher's aged features, he or she may be in for a bit of a surprise: Brother Ruden is quite plainly the spirit who appeared at the stronghold's entrance (see **Handouts #1 & #3**)! If the heroes search Ruden's body, they find Sister Eleyna's letter, still tucked safely away in an inner pocket over the man's heart; give the players **Handout #7**.

8. Well Room

When the heroes approach the double doors at the end of the hall, they can hear a single voice chanting within. Any Psychic hero can also sense that the room beyond the door is flooded with evil. In fact, within this final room the Abyssal energies pulsing through the Key create a –4 sinkhole of evil (imposing a –3 penalty on all turning attempts)! When a character attempts to turn one of the undead within this area, his or her holy symbol grows painfully hot (causing one point of damage per round) and glows as if a *light* spell were cast on it. Corruption this intense will require a madness check on the part of any Psychic heroes, but since the build-up has been gradual, the character can be considered to have prepared himself or herself for the shock, thus receiving a +4 bonus to the roll.

Master Bralkain has locked the doors from the inside to prevent his underlings from interfering with his rituals, but the doors can be opened with a successful Pick Locks or Bend Bars/Lift Gates roll. The well room is a large chamber, made somewhat cramped by numerous ancient supplies stacked around the perimeter of the room in dusty crates and moldy barrels. The open well at the rear of the room is ringed by a low wall.

When the heroes finally enter the room, read or paraphrase the following:

> A crimson ring of strange symbols has been painted onto the flagstones of the floor in this room, the unidentified pigments still glistening and wet. This ring is surrounded by some two dozen motionless figures, each one silently holding a thick, flickering candle in its hands. Most of these figures wear the gray robes of the Watchers, and all are quite clearly dead.
>
> A hideous creature stands in the center of the circle, chanting a ceaseless string of oily syllables, holding what looks for all the world like the steel heart of a madman's automaton over its head. A latticework of black veins, bleached bones, and yellowed eyes are all clearly visible through the creature's colorless, jelly-like flesh! As you watch, it cries out, "The hour is at hand! The conduit opens—" The creature's incantation stops as it turns its head to peer in your direction and lowers the steely heart. In the creature's horrid features you detect a note of both confusion and irritation.
>
> "And what do you children want?" it rasps.

The motionless figures are the animated corpses of the Watchers, supplemented by the few undead Kargat who were also killed during the raid. Unlike the other undead which lurk in these halls, these are simple, mindless zombies, the product of Bralkain's spells. The hideous undead figure is Master Bralkain, the vampiric leader of this unit of the Unholy Order of the Grave. For 170 years, Bralkain served Azalin as a leader in the Kargat. Like almost all the rest of the Kargat, he was present in Il Aluk during the Requiem. That event, which caused untold death and misery for thousands of others, had very little effect on the long-dead Bralkain, simply prompting him to change allegiance to his new master, Death.

Even more important than who Bralkain is in death is who he was in life. In the year 580, Bralkain led the wizards from Karg who accidentally created this living conduit and unleashed the Whistling Fiend upon the Land of Mists. Immediately after finding a way to shut the planar conduit, the wizards were invited to Avernus to receive the thanks of their king. Once they arrived, Azalin made good use of them, transforming them into undead servants utterly under his control. Bralkain's monstrous appearance is the result of the unspeakable sorcery Azalin used to transform him into undead, and the Abyssal energies even now flowing through him have done nothing to improve his looks.

After the Requiem, Death assigned Bralkain's unit the task of seeking out magical items for their master. Bralkain immediately took this opportunity to track down the missing Key to the Abyss, which had been stolen from Avernus after a century of experiments to improve its "utility" by carving away all the unnecessary components of the still-suffering living conduit. Now, Bralkain has tracked down the Watchers at the Gate and intends to finish what he and his comrades started nearly two centuries ago: to use the Key to the Abyss to bind a fiend to his will, then reap the benefits of its power! He believes that possession of the Key, combined with his spells and natural vampiric powers, will allow him to control the Whistling Fiend.

For the moment, Bralkain is content to simply speak to the heroes, trying to convince them not to interfere. Of course, time is of the essence, and Bralkain cannot afford a distraction; the Key has drained the very last drops of its blood supply, and even as the heroes enter the chamber, the planar conduit is opening. If Bralkain cannot immediately convince the heroes to leave, or should the heroes attack him, Bralkain immediately launches an attack, hoping to destroy the interlopers before they can disrupt his careful preparations. He orders his shambling zombies to attack the party, using them to slow the party down while he fires off a barrage of spells. Note that if one of the heroes is a Cold One, none of the zombies will attack that character unless he or she attacks them first.

The heroes must battle their way through the horde of zombies to wrest control of the Key away from Bralkain. Time is working against them, though—as they battle the vampire, the planar conduit is opening, and someone far closer than the Abyss has taken notice.

Zombies (25): AC 8; MV 6; HD 2; hp 13 each; THAC0 19; #AT 1; Dmg 1d8 (fist); SD immune to *sleep, charm, hold*, death magic, poison, and cold-based spells; SW holy water (2d4 points of damage per vial), may be turned; SZ M (5' to 6'); ML fearless (20); Int non (0); AL N; XP 65 each.

Master Bralkain, 9th-level Wizard and Vampire: AC 1; MV 12, fly 18 (C); HD 8+3; hp 60; THAC0 11; #AT 1; Dmg 1d6+4+energy drain (blow, Strength bonus) or by spell; SA touch drains three levels (Unholy Order of the Grave augmentation, no save), spells, *charm* gaze (–2 penalty to saving throw); SD *gaseous form*, spider climb (at will), regeneration (3 hp per round), immune to nonmagical weapons, immune to poison, paralysis, and *sleep, charm,* and *hold* spells, half-damage from cold and electricity, *shape change* (giant bat); SW garlic, mirror, holy symbol, sunlight, running water, holy water (1d6+1 points of damage per vial); SZ M (6'6"); ML champion (17); Int genius (18); AL CE; XP 9,000. Spells: *magic missile* (×3), *taunt; bind, levitate, Melf's acid arrow; fireball, hold person, lightning bolt; fire shield, shadow monsters; domination.*

DM Note

Starting in the round the heroes enter the well room, the final barriers between Necropolis and the Abyss are torn away. With each round, describe the following cumulative effects of the Abyssal energies pouring through the conduit. Although none of these manifestations have any direct game effects, they may well be worthy of a fear and horror checks!

Round 1: The earth shudders, opening cracks in the stone walls, ceiling, and floor. The shape of the room itself begins to slowly distort.

Round 2: A warm, greasy black slime boils up from the cracks in the floor, oozes down the walls, and drips from the ceiling.

Round 3: Sickly green light bursts from the depths of the well itself, bathing the dripping ceiling in a gangrenous glow.

Round 4: Distorted, inhuman shadows start playing against the infernal light, and a hideous, high-pitched wailing warns that something, or perhaps a great many somethings, are on their way!

Round 5: The first of the Abyssal entities arrives—but not from the conduit; proceed to the next section.

The Whistling Fiend

Bralkain seeks only to bind a single fiend to his power and has no more intention of letting fiendish forces overrun the world than do the heroes. However, Bralkain is not the only party with an interest in the Key to the Abyss. The Whistling Fiend first entered the Demiplane of Dread through the living conduit that is the Key, and it still has an intimate connection to the Key. Wherever it may be lurking within the Mists, it senses when the conduit opens, and immediately comes to investigate.

Due to an event far removed from Ravenloft, most fiends have lost their ability to *teleport without error*; the Whistling Fiend, however, has connected itself so strongly to the Mists that it retains that powerful ability so long as it is within the demiplane. Rather than teleporting, the Fiend simply mistwalks to the location of the Key (though until now the wards carved into the outer wall have prevented it from simply materializing in the stronghold itself). At the end of round 4 of the battle against Bralkain, the Whistling Fiend enters the stronghold via area 1. During round 5 everyone in the stronghold can hear the Fiend's eerie whistling tune grow louder as it saunters through the halls of the fortress, headed directly for the Key. Even if the heroes think nothing of the disjointed tune, Bralkain recognizes it immediately:

As the strange whistling grows louder, the undead wizard stops short and you see true fear creep into his eyes. "You fools!" he cries. "Your meddling has doomed us all! If you value your lives—or your eternal souls—stand back and do not interfere!"

No matter what actions the heroes take, Bralkain tries in vain to prepare himself for the Fiend's imminent arrival. In round 6, the Whistling Fiend finally makes its appearance:

The whistling tune comes closer, and closer still! As it nears, you hear the eerie tune now joined by a softer sound: a sizzling hiss. A moment later, you are given the source of this strange noise. At the end of the hall, you see a foot step into view, black as night, shriveled to the bones, and glistening with slime. As the foot touches the step, the very stones begin to smoke and boil!

Casually, yet with a certain gleeful spring in its step, the creature saunters down the stairs. Standing at least seven feet tall, it looks at first like a mummified corpse: dry, ebon skin stretched tight over a skeletal frame. But in the details this beast loses all claim to humanity. Its fingers sport blood-red talons, and every tooth in its jaw is a jagged fang. Its entire body is coated in obscenely glistening slime that looks like red jelly. A long, curving horn sprouts from the back of its skull, occasionally throwing sparks as it scrapes along the hall's low ceiling. Its eyes are pits of darkness illuminated by balls of bright green flame—the same diseased color as that thrown up from the screaming portal.

As the repulsive creature approaches, still merrily whistling its dreadful tune, you cannot decide which looks more wicked: the hooks and barbs on the metal pike it carries or the monster's shriveled grin.

The appearance of the Whistling Fiend is certainly worth a horror check; if Bralkain is still alive when the fiend arrives, then the creature is quick to demonstrate whom the heroes should truly fear:

The Whistling Fiend pauses to take a look at you all, but when its glowing eyes fall upon Bralkain, the horrid whistling takes on a new note. Grinning broadly, the creature slowly shakes a taloned finger in the vampire's direction, as if gently chastising a beloved pet. Bralkain frantically begins to cast a spell and is answered by the fiend's pike. The hideous creature rams the greenish-black metal barbs through Bralkain's chest, impaling the vampire-mage and effortlessly lifting him off his feet. As he dangles, Bralkain looks down at his own wound in mute horror for a moment before flaking away into dry ashes.

The fiend then tilts its head to glance at you. With an amused whistle, it swings its pike to point directly at you.

The Fiend now turns all of its attention to destroying the party. So long as it has defenseless victims to terrorize here, it is in no hurry to rejoin the Blood War, so leaping through the screaming portal is the last item on its agenda.

Until a hero wounds the fiend, it will treat the party as mere prey, using only its preferred weapon (the pike) on them. As soon as a hero wounds the fiend, however, the pitch of its whistling changes as it starts taking the opposition seriously and turns up the ferocity of its attacks. Although it still prefers to impale with its pike, it may instead use some of its spell abilities if these seem more appropriate.

The Whistling Fiend (Tanar'ri, Greater—Babau): AC –3; MV 15; HD 8+14; hp 65; THAC0 13; #AT 1 or 3 (pike or natural weapons); Dmg 1d8+7 (pike, Strength bonus) or 1d4+1/1d4+1/2d4 (claw/claw/gore); SA *gaze* (enfeeblement, 20' range), *corrosion* (contact with the "red jelly" coating the fiend's skin causes 1d6 points of acid damage), backstab (+4 attack bonus, quadruple damage), *choking fog* at will (15' diameter, centered on the fiend, all others must save vs. spell or suffer *confusion*), *poison touch* once per day (save vs. poison or die after 24 hours of agony, even on successful save target is wracked with pain and unable to cast spells, only able to enter combat at –4 attack penalty on successful save vs. death magic each round); SD immune to nonmagical weapons, immune to fire, poison, and electricity, half-damage from silver weapons, half-damage from magical fire, cold, and gases, corrosion ("red jelly" coating reduces slashing and piercing damage by half and has 20% chance of destroying any metal weapon that strikes it—item saving throw vs. acid to resist), thief skills (see below); SW full damage from acid, *magic missiles,* and cold iron; MR 50%; SZ M (7'); ML champion (15); AL CE; XP 17,000+. Str 19, Int 18.

Thief Abilities: Pick Pockets 30%, Open Locks 30%, Find & Remove Traps 25%, Move Silently 95%, Hide in Shadows 80%, Detect Noise 35%, Climb Walls 90%, Read Languages 30%. Spells (one per round, at will): *darkness 15' radius, dispel magic, fear, fly, heat metal, infravision, levitate, polymorph self, teleport without error (mistwalk).*

The Whistling Fiend will take quite obvious pleasure in the torturous destruction of the party, downing them one at a time. If the heroes try to stand up to it in a direct fight they will almost certainly be overwhelmed, especially after having just spent their resources battling the undead Kargat. However, if the heroes are lucky and clever, they may yet be able to snatch victory from the Whistling Fiend's grasp.

The Abyssal conduit can be sealed simply by "feeding" the Key. Anyone who wounds himself or herself with the Key's spike is drained of 1d6 hp each round until he or she breaks off contact with the living artifact. Once the Key is given 6 hp worth of blood, the conduit snaps shut, ending the immediate threat from the Lower Planes. However, closing the conduit does not dissipate the sinkhole of evil, nor does it have any effect on the Whistling Fiend itself. The Fiend will simply seek to kill the heroes so that it can claim the Key for itself and open the conduit again. If the heroes simply try to throw the Key into the portal, they find this impossible. The conduit is one-way, and at the moment leads only from the deepest levels of the Abyss into this very chamber!

In the off-chance that the heroes actually best the fiend in combat, they may be able to drive it off. If the fiend is dropped to dangerously low hit points, it mistwalks to the foyer upstairs, saunters outside, and vanishes into the Mists to lick its wounds. If the heroes have not yet sealed the conduit by this time, they can easily do so now. However, the fiend has a long memory (as Bralkain just learned to his sorrow), and the heroes can rest assured that some day the creature will come looking to even the score.

The heroes' best chance for victory rests in the Key itself. If the heroes read Sister Eleyna's letter (**Handout #7**), they may know a way to destroy the Whistling Fiend and the accursed Key in one fell swoop. If a hero manages to wound the Whistling Fiend with the Key's bloodthirsty spike, the Key immediately begins draining blood from the fiend to slake its own never-ending thirst. The Key to the Abyss is an unwieldy weapon (nonproficiency penalties apply), but it is somehow magically drawn to the fiend, granting a +1 bonus when attacking the Whistling Fiend. If a hero successfully strikes the fiend with the Key, read the following text aloud:

> As you jab the Key's razor-tipped blade deep into the fiend's oozing hide, the creature's merry whistling turns into an ear-shattering blare of pain and alarm. The fiend suddenly twists this way and that, tearing the Key from your grip as the creature desperately tries to claw the metallic object from its side—all to no avail. Even as the hooting fiend tries frantically to pry the Key loose, you can see the foul artifact doing its work, the crystalline tubes filling with black ichor.
>
> An instant later, the room begins to tremble from unknown pressures, and an icy wind flares to life, a whirlwind threatening to drag everything in the room down into the shimmering well. The fiend finally pulls the Key to the Abyss free, but too late. The Key is torn from the fiend's claws, sucked down into the portal, and the fiend itself dragged along to the lip of the well.
>
> The low walls of the well collapse, the stones sucked down into the deepest levels of the Abyss, and the fiend is left hanging over an open maw. There it is caught, torn between the planar forces dragging it back to its wellspring and the unknowable powers which tie it to this land. Finally, the tug-of-war is decided. As the fiend wails horribly, a sound that you know will haunt your dreams for years to come, its shriveled body is torn asunder, dragged back to the Abyss one squirming, oozing piece at a time. As the last remnant of the fiend is sucked down into the pit, the winds double in strength, pulling you forward as if to share the Whistling Fiend's gruesome fate!

Any heroes who does not immediately flee the room must make a successful Strength check to avoid being pulled into the gaping portal. Those who avoid this dire fate survive to see the portal snap shut in the next round:

> The winds double and redouble, threatening to drag the entire stronghold down into the pit. Then, with a deafening thunderclap, they die. The conduit snaps shut, collapsing back down into the evil realm from whence it came. All is quiet and calm. As you gasp for breath, you realize a change has come over the chamber. The ooze, the heat, the sulfurous stench are all gone. Although it came at great cost, two of the land's most vile evils have been stopped this day, and the unwitting world has you to thank for it.

The End

Handout #1

As the Watcher continues to urge you on your way, a second monk steps out from the stronghold's massive doors. The second monk's head is uncowled, and desperation is etched deeply into the aged lines of his face. A sudden chill slithers down your spine as you realize that you can see the timbers of the door through this spectral monk. No matter how many times you see the dead, it always catches you off guard. The spectral monk notices that he has caught your eye and bursts into a frenzied display of motion! Frantically jabbing a finger at the brusque Watcher, the silent spirit grits his teeth, runs a thumb across his own throat, and desperately shakes his head and hands at you, as if warning you away!

Handout #2

The monk sighs once in her distressingly dry voice, then offers your group some advice: "It is obvious to me that whatever fate befell your messenger happened to him on his return trip. You do him no good by lingering here. I recommend that you continue to trace his steps back to your headquarters." The Watcher chuckles mirthlessly, reaching out to gently touch your shoulder and turn you back in the direction from whence you came.

However, the instant the Watcher touches you, a nightmarish vision floods your senses! You see a woman whom you know to be this doorwarden, but dressed in leather armor and bearing the weapons of a warrior. She stands in a darkened city street, patrolling a hulking citadel. Suddenly, the citadel is blasted to rubble by a terrible burst of hideous energy! Darker than darkness, yet shimmering with violet light, the wave of energy sweeps across the buildings, across the city streets, across the woman herself, killing all it touches! And yet, death is not the end . . . .

The vision ends, and once again you stand before the mountain fortress, the robed doorwarden in front of you.

Handout #3

Sliding from a shadowy corner, the spectral, aged monk once again enters your view. He seems calmer now yet still carries a sense of urgency. Making sure you're watching, he repeatedly jabs two fingers at his chest, directly over his heart. From the spirit's pleading face, you know this is a message, but what message? Even as you ponder this, the spirit slowly fades from view, somehow leaving you with the knowledge that he has truly departed.

Handout #4

Historical Records (580)

A simple farmer near Creeana took on a terrible sickness, his body getting all twisted and bent. The local priest came to look at the poor soul, and he said the man was beset by wicked spirits. The priest tried to rid the man of the evil spirits, but they were too powerful. So the priest sent for help, and in reply came a group of wizards from Karg, led by a man named Bralkain. They learned that the man's body was slowly being replaced, bit by bit, by some kind of infernal entity.

Those wizards were not powerful enough to reverse what was happening to the poor man. In the end, they trapped the man's spirit in some kind of limbo, caught between our world and whatever horrid place those "infernal entities" came from. A fiendish creature rose up from the poor man's ruined body, using the man's soul as the anchor between our worlds. The thing just started whistling, merry as you please, and slaughtered two of the wizards from Karg right there and then. Then it sauntered off and destroyed Creeana. Folks never had a chance.

The Whistling Fiend was busy, but so were the wizards, at least those that were still alive. Somehow, they found a way to seal up that pathway between our world and the nether realms; they found some key to lock the gate. Just as soon as they closed that pathway, the Whistling Fiend vanished, and nobody saw it for another hundred years. As for the wizards and the man they'd turned into a living gateway, nobody ever saw them again.

Handout #5

The Key to the Abyss

Legend had it that Castle Avernus was built atop a portal to the Abyss, and when we penetrated its deepest dungeons in 675, we found this peasants' tale disturbingly close to the truth. Rather than a simple gate, we found an artifact: the Key to the Abyss. All attempts to destroy the Key have proven futile.

* * *

The Key to the Abyss is an oddly shaped object, roughly the size of a human head and made from a dark metal we have not yet been able to identify. Several crystalline tubes are attached at uneven intervals around the Key's sides, all just as impervious to harm as the metal lump which serves as its core. A razor-sharp, retractable, spike-like tube extends from the Key's "top"—if it truly has a discernible top. The Key is both conduit and guardian to some unholy place consumed by foul magic and hideous creatures, a place of madness and death. The Key can keep the portal closed only so long as it is kept strong. The Key takes its strength from the blood of intelligent creatures. The crystalline tubes hold an ever-diminishing supply of blood, which must be regularly replenished via the spike. Should the Key ever consume its entire supply of blood, its power will crumble, and the conduit to the Abyss will be thrown open wide . . . .

Handout #6

Personal Journal of Brother Jarvik

Entry 206: The strange metal which protects the Key continues to resist all attempts to pierce its shell. But, where brute force will not do, perhaps subtle magics will suffice . . .

Entry 209: The experiments can tell us no more. I have seen into the very core of the Key to the Abyss, and what I have seen leaves me puzzled. Anyone who holds the Key can feel it pulse in their hands; who knew the reason for this would be so obvious? Forever sealed within the Key is a still-beating heart, half human and half . . . something else.

Entry 374: I have recently uncovered tales of a "living conduit" surrounding the legends of the Whistling Fiend. Could the Key be part of those tales or, perhaps, their final evolution? Could it be that the Key, this ever-beating inhuman heart, could be all that remains of the hapless "living conduit?" I shudder to think of the poor man's soul, locked in endless struggle with fiendish forces all these decades!

Handout #7

To Brother Ruden of the Watchers:

Greetings, and I hope this message finds your Order well. I have been studying the past of the Key to the Abyss, and I came to a sudden realization which I hope you may find of some use. We know that the Key is caught in a limbo between this world and the nether realms. We also know that supplying the Key with mortal blood gives it the strength to keep the gateway sealed, but we have never understood exactly why the Key thirsted for this blood. This is my revelation: The Key houses a living heart, itself caught between the human and the fiendish. Giving the Key human blood strengthens its ties to its own humanity, keeping it bound to our world. It is only when the Key lacks this source of strength that it is once again pulled halfway between the worlds, thus allowing the conduit to open. But what would occur were the Key to be supplied with fiendish blood? Might the power of the fiendish blood snap the Key into the nether realms, breaking the connection to this plane and collapsing the conduit upon itself? Do please send a reply back with Brother Greggory; I'm most curious to read your thoughts on the matter.

Humbly,
Sister Eleyna